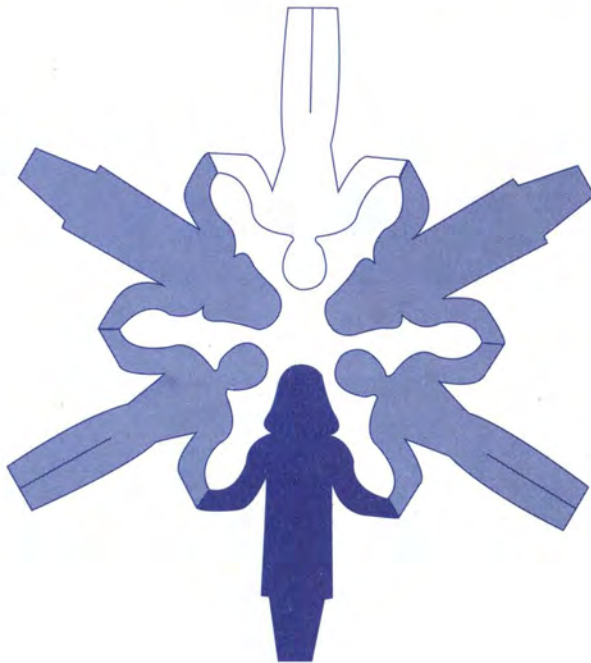


We Are

CANDORA



*The CANDORA STORY has been written by the women of CANDORA
with Gail Campos.*

January 20, 1994

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN FONDLY and very many times not so fondly referred to as the CANDORA Story. For 2 years now an ever changing small group of women have met together with the task of putting words to our experiences of being part of an organization called CANDORA. Finally, after numerous attempts to gather women's personal stories, find pictures, connect with people who have moved away, reschedule meetings, go on retreat in hope that the hard questions would be magically answered, interview writers, agree to disagree, laugh, scream and cry, find lost or stolen transcripts of interviews, appease the funders, write memos to assure the powers that be that this project is real and will surface one day, the job is done.

We celebrate Carmen Huezo, Celia Flores, Yvonne Higgins, Colleen, Bev Sochatsky Downing, Gail Campos and Patsy Price for hanging in through this very trying participatory process. We were constantly reminded on the importance of "process" as we inched along towards the creation of this "product."

We acknowledge Grant MacEwan Community College Community Education Division for their support to this project and their commitment to community and the process of community development. Many thanks to THE LEARNING LINK for funding and publishing this New Initiatives project. Thanks to Kate Quinn for suggestions and proofing.

This is a story of content not form. Its validity comes from the deeply human daily struggle of the women of CANDORA. This is a struggle not only for survival, but for learning and improving ourselves. We struggle for all women in a situation similar to our own, for our children and for our children's children.

It is our intention to tell our story, to carry a message of hope. We invite you the reader to reflect on your own story, your own journey into life and community as you read this book. Each of our stories are very different and yet in our differences we find the common struggles that are made easier when we create for ourselves a community of people who are committed to change and committed to ourselves as we grow into our own potential and affect positive change in our lives and communities.

In the CANDORA story we name the difficulties that the present economic and social system sustains and maintains. We describe the context in which we move and live. We share how we are working together to overcome these difficulties and create pathways of hope. If other people and other communities can be strengthened through the telling of our story, then we will have achieved our goal.

In this book we will meet some of the women who are part of the CANDORA Society of Edmonton and who have worked to make this book. Together they tell the story of the CANDORA Society, about the community, and the work they do. The CANDORA Society works on the principles of participatory education. Throughout the book we will look at some of those principles, and show some of the methods. There is no one starting place for CANDORA. CANDORA is a living process, weaving together many different ideas and people.

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Welcome to CANDORA

IN CANDORA WE ARE INVESTING our time and energy to get a better life. Everybody is welcome. It doesn't matter their origin, culture or race. We are concerned about the necessities. We support Canadians and immigrants from many countries. The project provides opportunities, education services and public relations. We spend our time doing things for ourselves as persons, for our families, and the people around us. Together, with hope, we are engaged in learning to build a healthy community with the people who enjoy being a part of CANDORA. We are trying to strengthen the ability to organize ourselves. CANDORA'S success is working with disadvantaged people, single mothers, unemployed people or the working poor. We want to create and increase our capacity to live together, our ability to make choices, the vision of a good community, peace, and understanding between us. Another characteristic of CANDORA is the respect for one another. Our community is poor. It has few economic resources, but it is rich in human resources. We are immersed in deep social problems like poverty, violence, unemployment, vandalism. But, through education we must learn a new way of thinking, new way of living. We need to build new skills, new actions.

Carmen Huevo



The tables are covered with beads , thread, cloth, papers. The coffee brews in the kitchen. Children wander throughout the room. Conversations start and stop. There is life in this room. This is CANDORA.



A Little History

THE CANDORA SOCIETY was incorporated in 1989 in response to the needs of the communities of Abbottsfield and Rundle Heights in Northeast Edmonton. Its roots are firmly in the community. There were women who had been working in the community who wanted to see some changes in how people live. And there were women who lived in the community who wanted to see some changes too. CANDORA is the result of those people meeting, and working together over the years. First let's meet Carmen.

"Saskatchewan River." From a young age, as a student, I repeated this name time and time again, not understanding the attraction that saying Saskatchewan had for me. In my country my life was very busy, my family, my work, social activities, my church group filled all the available hours. In the 1970s the socio-political upheaval shook all the citizens, the violence intensified, as did the human rights violations and the number of disappeared.

Years and years of repression resulted in violent rebellion. In 1980 my youngest children had to leave the country for the U.S.

For my husband and I, leaving for another country was not an easy decision. I was full of sadness: to leave my country, my family, my work, to leave everything, every-

thing that I had loved. It was like putting a gravestone on all my securities, everything caused my anguish, but the circumstances forces me to leave my native soil and go to the U.S.

Three years of hard experiences, what an education it was! I learned the value of the smallest things and to enjoy them, to accept with patience the hardships of a new life, depending only on the love and mercy of God. Each day I awakened to the realization of how inhospitable is a country like the US to those who don't have papers. Each day, early in the morning I looked out my bedroom window at the pine trees, it gave me a feeling of being in the forest: what did those pine trees see deep in my soul? What would be the next step? Everything came together three years later, like a great blessing. I have been living here since 1983.

Bev Sochatsky Downing was introduced to the community in 1985. Bev worked for the Consumer Education Project of Grant MacEwan Community College. Cathy Vereyken became involved in the community when she came to work at the Beverly Social Services office for the City of Edmonton in the summer of 1985.

The Consumer Education Project had a history of program delivery. The usual approach of the Consumer Education Project was to create and offer programs based on what the department saw as the needs of the people. This can be useful. However, a decision was made to try a different approach. The challenge was to explore working in community development. Bev Sochatsky Downing speaks of the shift in direction of her project:

It was a huge new language and way of working for me. The Consumer Education Project hired Virginia Sauve and she and I began to look at working in a different way — a participatory approach to education. We did a needs assessment and chose the north east end of Edmonton. Virginia met with social workers and I talked with Cathy Vereyken... Cathy suggested that we look at the Abbottsfield and Rundle communities and was then instrumental in linking us with the Echo Valley Tenant Centre run by members of the Maranatha Church.

Virginia and I met with the women from the Maranatha Church. It was agreed that we could use the Echo Valley Tenant Centre, which was located in a subsidized housing complex, on Friday mornings. Our next task was to find the people to participate. We then went knocking on doors in the low income (Edmonton Housing) complex, met with principals of the Schools, (Abbott Elementary and St. Sophia). We got a core group of women who began to meet every Friday morning

at the Echo Valley Tenant Centre. We called ourselves the Abbottsfield Women's Project.

Our intent was to work in a participatory approach to education, to get the women to name their issues and then as a group take action on them. This was a very different way of working for me and for our project. Virginia and I worked together for one year (September 1985 to summer of 1986), and I continued for the second year alone. It felt like an overwhelming task to work in this way on my own. I had a very middle class view of the world. I was continually challenged to broaden my world view — to begin to see and understand how the system is oppressive, how the cycle of poverty plays itself out and how and why intergenerational welfare exists.

Bev recalls that during her second year with the Abbottsfield Women's Project, she and Cathy Vereyken kept running into each other.

Cathy and I saw that we had similar interests in the community at a meeting where the Abbottsfield Women's Project invited Connie Osterman (then the Minister for Alberta Social Services) to meet with them to discuss their issues and to come into a low income community. (Connie Osterman would later be instrumental in assisting the CANDORA Society to access land near the Alberta Hospital for a community garden.)

Many of the women who had been involved in the Abbottsfield Women's Group had moved away from the community, in response to rent increases. This high degree of transiency continues to be a challenge. With that base group of women gone from the community, Bev and Cathy began to work together to form what was to become CANDORA.

A main focus for Cathy and Bev was to look at the resources in the neighbourhood. They were committed to seeing strength in the area, not only problems.

Cathy talks about the philosophy or idea that they were interested in trying:

One key thing was to put the priority on income, invest in choice and invest in the community. The concept was to put money into the hands of community advocates.

We both felt really strongly that we wanted to pay as many people as possible — to get the money into the hands of the people in the community. Paying the people

in the community and having the community be their own best community worker rather than an expert parachuting in and fooling ourselves that there is a quick fix to the social problems of crime, violence, poverty, unemployment, underemployment, lack of education, poor health vandalism etc...

It was important to find long term, stable funding, so that the project would not be dependent on short term employment grants. There was also the philosophical difference between having one highly paid professional staff person, versus the rippling effect of paying people who live in the community doing the community development work. As Cathy pointed out, "They don't stop working when they go back home, whereas a social worker comes in at 9 a.m. and leaves at 5 p.m."

Proposals were written and both Bev and Cathy committed a portion of their work week to the project. The original idea was to form a co-op in the community, although it was later realized that this did not meet the needs of all the people in the group. A non-profit society was formed instead. (Some members went on to form the WeCan Coop, which is a worker's coop. Producers of crafts pool resources and earn income together through the sale of their products. The Coop also holds the lease for a community garden, which will be described in a later chapter.)

Money was found through the City of Edmonton. An office was available at the local mall, and there were two persons available to work with the project. All that was missing was the participants. Bev explains how they went about trying to reach the community.

We sent out 1400 flyers into the community. We paid kids from the Second Chance for Youth Project to distribute them. We also put an ad in the Edmonton Examiner and the Beverly Page. We wondered if anyone would apply. We put a box on the door of the Abbotsfield Youth Project and asked people to drop off their application. The ad read "Work in Your Own Community. The Community Advocacy Project offers part-time employment, 5 hours per week at \$5.00 per hour starting May 2, 1988. This employment opportunity is a special project for low income residents of the Abbotsfield Rundle communities."

Carmen Huezo was one of the first applicants. She recounts her initial call to Cathy.

I'm 57 years old, I don't know if I can go there. Cathy said "It doesn't matter, its OK." For me it was scary because for everywhere that I went to apply for a job I understand that my age was a big barrier. I feel scared about this and my English too, especially when I listen to Cathy and she speaks very fast. My goodness. What can I do there?

Each of the people who came to be interviewed were asked "What is your commitment to this community?" and "What would you like to do in this community?" Bev Sochatsky Downing remembers the results of that day:

At the end of the day there was this incredible list of things that people said. 'We choose to live in this community.' Yes, there were some negatives but there were a lot of positives: "close to the schools, close to the buses, close to shopping, my family and relatives are in this community." There were all these pluses that we could build on."

Carmen continues, describing her first day

"I feel so scary, so shy. Listen to other people and I didn't know exactly what I can do here. What was the reason for us being here? You began to explain something, and the first day I didn't understand nothing. We used to meet 2 half days a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. We had muffins and coffee and child care.

In the following pages, you will be able to read about some of what did happen over the years. The CANDORA Society has gone through many phases and changes and grows to meet the needs of the participants.

The original program was entitled the Community Advocacy Project, and provided a small amount of money to women who worked as community workers. The amounts that women earn are small, geared to not interfere or result in any decrease in the amount of social allowance that they are entitled to receive.

The group met twice a week for several hours to look at such topics such as life choices, community issues and then, to further action. As Carmen outlined above, one of the earliest projects was to look at the activities for children. Carmen shares her personal story and gives us a look at the Advocacy Project.

“

I'm Carmen, I have been here since 1983. I came from El Salvador with my family, we left our country under the pressure of civil war.

This is my personal story, my struggles to survive, filled with tears and hope, because after the storm comes the sun. This is a message for everybody, but especially for immigrant women who are looking for their identity in Canada. We must preserve our culture and maintain bonds with our family.

I used to teach in the different levels of education. I had a scholarship at the University of Puerto Rico, as a student of Educational Sciences. I worked in different programs for Education, I wrote books for children of Central America with educators from all over Central America. I took part in many education programs, such as educational television. I knew of the struggles of my people looking for social justice and I was part of the powerful Teachers Association called ANDES. This group led El Salvador to profound changes.

I came here with hope, but the reality is different. It is not simple to cope with a new language, new society, new concepts, etc. This caused frustration, anxiety, this time of trials were hard in this new life.

I tasted bitter experiences like isolation, discrimination, hostility. I went to school to learn English, but up to now, English is a headache for me, a pain in my neck.

I got training as a nursing assistant in a hospital, but my physical state and my age were a barrier. After that, I felt homesick, down, isolated, the whole world on my shoulders, enclosed in my home.

I asked God for a challenge, the answer came in the paper, in the Ad pages. Astonished, I read: "Job for people who are living in Rundle and Abbottsfield, \$5.00 per hour, 5 hours a week. Wow! is it a miracle? Is it possible? I phoned the number that was indicated in the paper and I got an interview. The day of my interview I was excited, but two lovely women interviewed me, I felt calm and confident with them, but I want to tell you: Till now I don't know how they

understood my broken English.

We talked about the neighbourhood, problems, the good and the bad, possibilities in the future... Surprise! I was hired. I was proud with my new job, but I asked myself, what am I going to do there?

On May 3rd, 1988, ten women from the communities of Rundle and Abbottsfield came together for the first time. In the very beginning we didn't understand the philosophy of the Centre, little confused, for me was the worst. The next days we visited all the neighbourhood, looking for the real physical problems in the area. No good — playgrounds dirty, not enough lights, no police patrol, no security, vandalized cars, etc.



We met Tuesdays and Thursdays. We did a community walkabout. A format started take shape: Look at our community, look at ourselves, look at action — what did we want to do? In May and June we met every Tuesday and Thursday. In July the Summer Shack took off, run by Jo, Bernice and Joanne. The Summer Shack provided recreational activities for children in the community.

Another group was involved in doing a community survey — Millie did a lot of work and so did I translating.

We began an educational series called "The Pursuit of Happiness."

The group began to understand the philosophy of the Advocacy Project. The intent was to provide all the participants with valuable experience, work experiences, to reach isolated families, assisting them in accessing resources, to give valuable information, and provide, through the Centre, mutual support. We began to design programs for the community, working toward making the community a better place to live. In total, it was people helping people, dealing with the needs of the neighbourhood. At that time we didn't understand that we were creating basic and profound changes around the community and in our personal lives.

”

In the fall, the group went through a complete change over, something that would be typical of the Project in the years to come. Some people went back to school, found work, or moved away from the community. For others, personal problems kept them away. The group was constantly in change, with members flowing in and out.

Initially, money for the project was channelled through the Abbotsfield Youth Project. As the project changed, it became possible to seek funding through other government departments. Cathy recalls that one City Councillor, Julian Kinisky, said "pigs will fly before the province will pick up the funding for this project," but in the end funding was obtained for the Employment Preparation Program that would allow for gradual re-entry into the work place. (This program is discussed more fully in Chapter 3).

The group grew and the organization was named CANDORA, "Can Do in Rundle and Abbotsfield." The name had special meaning for Spanish-speaking people as well. Candora means openness and honesty in Spanish. The project had begun. You have met some of the people involved. In Chapter 2 we will look at the communities of Abbotsfield and Rundle.

Personal

WHO ARE WE? We are, almost all of us, single mothers. We are, almost all of us, on Social Assistance. Almost all of us have small children. What does society want from us? What does society have to offer us? We want to work. We want day care for our children. We want the same wages as men for doing the same job. We want justice. We want the opportunity to prove to society that we can be productive, creative, useful to ourselves, to our children and to our society.

The opinion of the majority of people who work is that Social Services gives us enough money for everything: the majority of the people think that we are lazy, that we like the easy way of everything, that we are useless. In their opinion we are people without skills or education. But all of these are myths.

1) Because Social Services gives us only the minimum to survive, we spend between 60% and 70 % of this money to pay the rent and utilities, the other 30% is for food, transportation, clothes, shoes and entertainment!!

2) We are not lazy people. We want to work, but where are the jobs we need? Who wants to give us a job when they know we have children and we don't have help because we don't have a partner at home?

When the employer knows that we are poor, they know that our children are more apt to be sick and we have to be at home taking care of them. It is very easy for them to say no to us. Anyway there are plenty of other people looking for work. They don't have the same problems we have, so employers will hire them before us.

3) We don't like to be on social assistance. We feel bad. We feel frustrated. Most of the time we are depressed. but believe us, this situation is not easy. It is not easy to be poor. It is not easy to live in poverty. It is not easy to be in anguish every day of our life. It is not easy to grow older in poverty.

4) It is true that not all of us have an academic diploma or a paper that gives credit for our skills. Being together here we have learned that we have skills. We know we are good for something and we can do many things well. We need the opportunity to prove ourselves. We have the right to ask for that opportunity. We need to prove to society that we can be productive. We can be creative!!!

“

Ana Henriquez is a Central American woman and a member of CANDORA.

It is almost 8 years since I left my country and over five years that I came as a refugee from Central America. We have a long experience of the same problems as any immigrant woman. But in other ways life is very different. We were forced to leave. We had to save our lives and the lives of our loved ones. We do not want to stay. Perhaps we will have to stay but we will always be ready to pack and return home. But do not get me wrong: we, like most people, are looking for a better life and we try to do our best while we are in Canada. Our goal is to work hard, learn things and prepare ourselves. We, the refugee and immigrant women from Central America, come from all walks of life: some of us are professionals, other technicians, we are different ages and live at different economic levels. But what brings all of us together is that we care very deeply for our countrymen and women and we all believe that those who live in poverty and misery have the right to live with dignity in peace and freedom.

We wanted a better future for our children. We got involved in unions, associations and organizations fighting for the basics of life. (shelter, food, education and work) Some of us were not even into these fights but we were married to leaders of the opposition, university students or union representatives. That was enough to signal us as subversives and troublemakers. Many of my friends have disappeared, were murdered, and tortured with their children.

Just a few of us were able to escape and are now living in exile. The day of the exile ends with sadness, desperation and uncertainty about the future. We arrived in Canada which became a shelter, a place in which we feel safe; that in many ways welcomes you, but in many ways is not prepared to deal with the things that will become your frustrations in the future.

Canada is different. It is not like my country. The cultural values are different, things are done in a way that is unfamiliar to me, the people live differently. Most Canadians have never seen 5 year olds shining shoes in the street for 50 cents a day. Women have not

been tortured, raped or left alone as a consequence of political violence. Men have not been taken away and never seen again.

Now I am a Canadian citizen, but I am still trying to get used to the cold winters and hot summers. The country that I came from is known as the country of eternal spring. One of the problems that I encounter when I came to Canada is the language. I had to go to school to learn it. A profession is very important, but my five, six, ten years of post-secondary education are not recognized. I have to start all over again, and that is why there are so many talented men and women, doctors, psychologists, lawyers, teachers, working as unskilled labourers for low salaries. I ask myself, were all my dreams shattered; facing unfair treatment, discrimination, lack of opportunities and limited access to services? It is not so easy but I need to stay and do the best that I can in everything that I do. I don't have to prove to anybody that I am a superwoman, but I can't let the exile destroy my life. I learned different things while I am involved in CANDORA and one of those things is that nothing can break my spirit and my principles are now stronger than ever and the fight has not ended yet. I need to win this fight.

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The Community

Abbottsfeld and Rundle Heights are two communities with their own history and conditions. Celia, a lawyer from Guatemala, lives in the community. She has gathered information about the community from census reports, by asking questions and from her own observation. Everyone can find out things about their communities by asking questions, and finding the resources in libraries or with other people. Every city, province and federal government has statistics and census reports. Community groups can get this information and use it to begin to ask questions about their community. Often we rely on experts to tell us what is going on. The people who know what is happening in the community are the people who live in it. For Celia, having the information is only part of the picture. She also wants to know why things are this way. Celia writes:

For a decade after annexation in 1961 there was no residential development in Abbottsfeld. But Abbottsfeld became unique among Edmonton's pre-1980's neighbourhoods in that all residential development in Abbottsfeld consists of row housing and apartment complexes. The majority of this is subsidized housing. Why? We ask ourselves why? We feel, that when the City annexed this area, it was already in the mind of the planners to develop this area as a place for poor people, a place for people who are living in poverty. Because who needs a subsidized home? Who are the people who are always looking to pay less rent? The poor people, people like us!! But now we know something very important: it was not an accident. Nothing is an accident when somebody makes a plan before the events happen.

These housing projects were built at a time of an extreme housing shortage in Edmonton, brought on by the boom of the 1970's. They were built under subsidized programs for private developers to provide low income housing for a period of time. When the subsidies ran out, there was little incentive for landlords to keep up the housing. A number of houses in the area are condemned by City of Edmonton standards.

The CANDORA Society attempts to take action when and where possible. One group of women from the CANDORA Society had met to take with City

officials about the housing situation. What follows is a list of concerns that were forwarded to the City of Edmonton. A letter went out to all the residents of Edmonton Housing in that area, so they could be represented fairly at the meetings.

- 1) The inside area of the complex doesn't have enough lighting for when it starts to get dark and when it is dark.
- 2) The park is unsafe, eg. the wood is breaking (rotting).
- 3) There is broken glass all over the place:
 - in the park
 - on the sidewalks
 - on the grass
 - on the roads
- 4) The cats that are outside use the park as a washroom therefore it is not very sanitary or healthy for children to play in.
- 5) Maintenance within the home is not being done:
 - the pipes under the kitchen sink have been disconnected, seal is broken since moved in 2 1/2 years ago and it also leaks.
 - the floors are in bad condition. The tiles are lifting off and are also discoloured and miss matched.
 - the base boards are coming off or are off
 - no heat — the furnace is not working properly
 - the fridges are falling apart or have fallen apart; eg. freezer doors, crispers, door shelves fall off
 - showers are cheap, the hose unravels
 - hot water tank doesn't have enough hot water
 - the furnace is not big enough to heat a three story town house
 - a tenant was told that they needed a new water tank and that it could burst anytime. The resident manager said they would request a new one, after 3 or 4 months, there is still no response.
 - the door locks are not changed with each new tenant
 - bathroom sink is falling apart
 - frame on the front door is falling away from the house

- new tenants are not shown the importance of fire alarms and how to operate them
- the manager doesn't seem to respond
- some people get attention faster than others
- landlord says "I'll do it" but never acts
- lots of property manager turnover
- some feeling of discrimination



From the census information gathered by the City of Edmonton one can learn that the communities of Abbottsfield and Rundle are situated in the northeast sector of the city. Industrial development in that area make it one of the most polluted areas in the city. There is a very high proportion of children under 20 years of age, and many single parent families.

Full time employment is lower than in many other Edmonton communities, and average family incomes are much lower than the average for the city.

Many people are renters, and the population moves often. Given this kind of information, people in the community can begin to ask questions. Celia and the other women in the group raise questions about the community in which they live.

We didn't know anything about the percentages but now we know, we start to ask, why? Why are we here? Why so many poor people in this area? Why in the north-east? We find so many interesting answers. We are here, because in the 1980's the rents were less expensive than in other parts of the city and one of the reasons could be that it is because of the pollution; because we don't have the services that other people have.

We have unemployment, we have crime, we have family violence. We have abused children, beaten women, we have alcohol abuse, and drugs. That is what we have. What we don't have is work, programs for people who abuse drugs and alcohol, we don't have programs against family violence, we don't have safety for our children. We don't have the police when we call them for help. The police will come only after somebody has committed a crime. No one can do anything to prevent a crime.

Loretta Shears, a community resident and member of the Advocacy Project shares the concerns about the children. She often speaks out at community meetings.

... there is nothing in this community for kids over the age of 12. From way back then, when we met over there (at the Echo Valley Tenant Centre) — we said that there wasn't anything for kids over the age of 12. When I went to the meeting on Juvenile Crime — I brought up this issue — lack of activities for kids in the community. I bring it up as often as I can. We need a centre here, a drop-in centre, even if it's a basketball hoop and a pool table, something, something to keep the kids active. The kids get into trouble, there is vandalism. We are hoping that we can get something started at St. Sophia when it becomes a community facility. (Note: The Abbottsfield Recreation Centre was opened officially on September 18, 1993. Members of CANDORA worked with other community people to help make this possible.)

Celia speaks of the kinds of activities she notices in youth in the area:

Due to boredom, some local youths engage in wall painting, littering and vandalism. As a good portion of these youths come from poverty-stricken, low income families and do not have a good education, they resort to activities adversely affecting the social and residential environment in this place.

Anne Boyenga Nikolai, a community resident, has been both volunteer and paid staff for CANDORA. She shares her thoughts about the 'community.'

... I see a community that from the outside and from a statistical perspective is one that's ripe with all these kinds of social ills that go along with people living in pov-

erty. The stats for Northeast Edmonton are the highest for domestic violence and beer consumption. I mean if you want to see some lousy stats just look at them for Northeast Edmonton.

...The real sadness is that when people see themselves as a success it is when they can leave this community. To me that's a real sadness because it means that this community will never have a sense of being a healthy place to live and the reality for a lot of people who live here is there is no other place to go. It's a place where there's affordable housing, there's some subsidized units and so for me, because people live in poverty, they are often the victims of a system or systems that really emphasize their deficiencies...

But, behind those stats are a lot of really wonderful people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds that have skills and have strengths... To me the community is a wonderful place with lots of wonderful people.



The community has its share of problems. As we can see from the comments of the women who have spoken out, there is also a lot of strength and energy to confront the problems and create a safer, healthier community.

“

Celia Flores is a Central American woman and a member of CANDORA.

Speaking about social and economic disadvantages for the women in our society is nothing new. The Federal Government and the Provincial Government spend a lot of time and a lot of money each year, financing studies and plans from their offices. They do studies about poverty, about children at risk, about crime in our communities etc. Why? We think because people in power feel like they need to know everything about the problems, how deep is it? How big are the problems, how risky could all this

A lot of these studies are very serious efforts of social research to explain the causes and effects of poverty. We know that all the studies and publications do little about poverty. The studies always say something about the kind of services the community needs. Nothing has been done!

Poverty produces all kinds of social diseases: crime, alcoholism, family violence, social violence, theft, drugs, prostitution, pervers, the abuse of children etc. These are problems that affect the poor people who live in our community. But not only are these things a problem in our community, they are general problems that affect all of society. Because we are the poor who have to suffer all of these, we are scared for our children. We are living in fear. We hope that politicians and people in power with resources, understand that poverty is violence, life without health is violence, life without opportunities is violence, life without education is violence, but the worst of all kinds of violence is the absence of jobs, because this is the violence of the people with financial and economic resources against the people without any resources.

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Programs & Initiatives

"My first day back at CANDORA after my summer vacation. The centre was a bee hive of activity. I brought boxes of clothes from families in Barrhead. Gloria immediately started opening the boxes and began sorting through the clothes. Suzanne found the fake fur coat and it looked great on her. Theresa had bags of clothes for herself and her son Trevor. Amen was very pleased to have found herself a winter coat and someone shouted across the room, "Yvonne, this coat would be good for your daughter."

After all the clothes were gone through I packed up the ones that were not taken and delivered them to a friend of Carmen's, a friend from El Salvador. A family with 5 children. The woman was so tiny and frail looking. Carmen says she is only 36 years old."

The programs of the CANDORA Society evolve out of the needs of the group and the community. There are many programs that exist, such as the native crafts, sewing group, language learning, employment preparation, community kitchen, garden project. Each of these projects were established after looking at the needs of the people in the community. The projects are coordinated and run by the members of the CANDORA Society.

In this chapter we will look at some of the different projects that have operated out of Candora. These are not all the programs, and many new ones are happening even as this book is being written. The purpose of this chapter is to share some of the ideas and learnings of the CANDORA Society.

The CANDORA Society was not the first attempt to put services and programs in place in the community. There had been some attempts to get things going. Parks and Recreation had already initiated a small project for youth. After the kids wrecked the gym floor, it was quickly learned that more than a recreation program was needed.

The learnings from the Abbottsfield Women's Project were also influencing the programs. For example, you can't have the women involved if you don't provide some place for their children. If you don't deal with people's immediate needs, you can't address the long term concerns. This holistic approach would be carried on into the CANDORA Society, and is an integral part of the philosophy of all the programs that are offered at CANDORA.

The Employment Preparation Program

THE EMPLOYMENT PREPARATION PROGRAM is designed to allow a gradual move into the work place for women on social assistance. There are no prerequisites for the program, as there are in many others. The program builds personal and group skills, as well as employment skills. As always, the emphasis is on the needs of the women. Trying to balance accountability to government funders, deadlines and evaluation criteria, and remaining faithful to principles of participatory education can be a strain.

Ann Boeyenga Nikolai, who worked with the Employment Preparation Program, explains:

I don't think there are many quick solutions today for anybody who doesn't have a lot of education or marketable skills, but it's a place to start. You need to see it as one tool of many that you're going to have to utilize before you can be self-sufficient. Maybe it won't work for you in finding a job but it's worked in other ways and done a lot of positive things in people's lives. It's not the kind of thing that's easily evaluated and not the kind of thing that's very honoured by funders. I just got an evaluation from Alberta Career Development that said most of what they're able to determine from all the programs is that people have had a sense of more self-esteem. To me, that's valuable for all the money that goes into it, but governments don't see it that way. They want to see outcomes right now in terms of people having jobs. I personally want to say that maybe the outcomes will be years later, but that programs like CANDORA have been a beginning...

... What I think is really important, and it's a principle of participatory education, is that we start with the lived reality of the people who come to this group. Their lived reality is much different than mine and we need to honour that, to start with that.

I think it's a good program and it really gives women a lot of time, particularly those with children, to make some of those adjustments. I really believe it's a sound program, dealing with obstacles more slowly is much more successful than dumping someone into a full time program and telling them that in a month you have to have your life together. What isn't good is there's that expectation that people will get employment and I think that I never say "Expect a job at the end." I always say, "It's going to give you a current work history, put some skills in place that are transferable" and to see this as a beginning of a very long road.



For many of the women, the program is a first step towards changes. The major benefit of the program may be that of self-esteem. As Anne Boeyenga Nikolai puts it: "With increased self-esteem, women are able to confront what is happening in their lives, not as objects (being acted upon) but as subjects. And when that happens, change can happen.

What is clear for the participants of the Society is that there is change, in people's lives and in the community. Part of that change comes from gaining a better feeling about oneself, and learning how to work with other people. Recently, with the support of a Native outreach worker at CANDORA, there has been an increase in the number of Native women taking part in the programs. The Native crafts and cooking classes are two examples.

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Well, my name is Tina. I've been to CANDORA about 2 years now, I'm actively involved. I try and spread the word quite a bit to get other women to come up here. Sometimes, when I have friends over, they ask me what CANDORA's all about so I try to give them the basic knowledge of what I know and I try to invite them to come up here on their own, of their own free will. I don't force them, it's optional. I try to explain that it's a good place to come, that there are people here who can help. And if you just need someone to talk to, to just sit down and listen, because they probably have the same experience that you are going through. It gives you more power to speak up to your social worker.

It's helped me with my self esteem. Helped me to overcome a lot of feelings of how I feel about myself, helped me to feel a lot better about me, I've learned to deal with a lot of problems with a calmer manner. I'm able to express myself a lot more. I try to make my opinions stand out, but it's hard

I look forward to coming here. I kind of slowed down a little bit on my volunteer hours, but I look forward to coming here, it's a good place to come to. (I got) a lot of support, people to help me stand up for myself. I needed a lot of support to do that, help in disciplining my children.

It was a chance to get out of the house. My mom was rather insistent that I not just sit around the house alone. The biggest obstacle was fear of myself, fear of being rejected. To come here and talk about myself was difficult.

It's important to get along cooperatively, sometimes it's not always that way. But you have to try. ...it helped me last year when I was in my (Tuesday morning) life choices (class). This year I'm working in the office.

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The CANDORA Project happened because the people in the community wanted it to happen. Not every person in the community wants to be involved, sometimes people need to be prodded and reminded. It is not always easy to work to make changes, especially if you feel like you've never been listened to before. People, if they are ready to work, can make a difference.

Some of the changes may seem small, but they may be the most important. Like being able to look at other people when they are talking to you. Or being able to say to a worker that you have rights. Or, like Loretta, sending a fax off to the Minister of Social Services, asking for a meeting.

Some of the changes are bigger, like getting a community centre started, or having English as a Second Language programs in your neighbourhood, or looking at ways to build local businesses.

This community may be like yours or it may be different. The work that the people in the CANDORA Society are doing can be done in any community. It takes time and a lot of patience.

The Gardening Project

One response to community needs is the gardening project. A major stress in people's lives is limited income. One way to stretch the food budget is to garden. It also meets some other needs, such as the need for something green and growing in a community with almost no green space.

Carmen Huezo writes:

When I came to Canada in 1983, and I and other Salvadorean people saw the beautiful land of Canada, we began to dream of a farming coop. Some years after, in 1989, CANDORA decided to begin our community garden. One of the best opportunities for building communities is gardening. When we started gardening the first thing that happened was in our Spirit; we are in touch with Mother Nature and we experience peace, calm, relaxation. All the parents would like to see their own children grow up very healthy, with a plentiful diet. These are some of the reasons for planting an organic garden every year. Our knowledge is growing and growing, now we know when and how to plant and the right time to harvest.

In 1989 we planted our first community garden, about 8 CANDORA members did it. For us it was spectacular, beautiful. But at this time I think wasn't really good. The first year was terrible, everybody wanted to plant, but nobody wanted to work. It was all weeds. But the soil was very rich and in the end, everybody took a few vegetables home. In 1990 we planted our garden, dividing the land into plots. Six families worked together on each plot. It was so nice. For the first time we made pickles.



In 1991, each family planted their own plot. We planted all kinds of vegetables. I grew and dried red and black beans. In 1992 we had 42 plots. That means 42 families working to get food for their families. For three consecutive years, Hispanic families have been planting their garden. In 1993, we are going to plant 50 plots. We are opening the door to gardening but our enthusiasm is bigger and bigger. Now we are professional weeders, with no fear that spiders and worms will crawl up our legs.

All together, with good will we are engaged in self help. We supplement our small incomes by planting our garden. Many Hispanic families are taking part in this successful project. In the beginning they didn't know the right time to harvest and plant, but people are learning fast now and they know all the secrets. One of the major tasks is to preserve and store the garden produce. Peer learning is fantastic, because everyone has their own experiences. We don't have a food technologist, or home economist. Thanks to CANDORA and their practical experiences and

tremendous enthusiasm we learn a lot about gardening and the best way to preserve the prides of our garden. We learn what vegetables are best for freezing and preserve the Vitamin C. Other varieties are excellent for canning, for pickling, others are good for drying or turning into sauce, tomato paste or jam. Some of the girls share with us the secrets that grandma had; like keeping old stockings filled with onions so the onions last the whole year.

Cooking every week is a program of CANDORA. This program began for people, for immigrants who didn't know how to use all the groceries that were received from the food bank. Everybody who wants to teach how to cook healthy, cheap food is able to participate in this program.

Our budget is very small and we try to do our best to help our families. Every year we donate vegetables to the food bank.

Our garden is located just northeast of the City. Each plot is 13 x 18 metres. Originally, we leased the land for one dollar for five years. Every members pays \$15.00 for each plot for the year. The money goes to Wecan Coop, who hold the lease for the land.

A gardening library has been started in the office. We accept donations. Some members want to start collecting helpful gardening hints from each other. We are trying to plant flowers for drying and selling. We are thinking of planting herbs for future businesses. A women's organization in the Philippines does this and exports to Japan.

Every year our reward is a plentiful harvest, the great satisfaction of reaching our goal and raising healthy food for our families.

Child Care

"The little guy went around the room, climbing on each chair, looking into the pot of each plant, under the table, through the legs of the women."

Children are accepted at Candora. They wander in and out of the child mind-ing area, which is next to the room where the mothers are meeting. They are able to visit back and forth, and they never seem to be "in the way." Mothers are more able to participate at CANDORA when they know that their children are being cared for. Histories of family violence, interference from social workers, and the constant negative image of "welfare moms" can take a toll on women. Mothers are often the sole support for the children, there may not be extended family who can provide childcare.

At CANDORA there is a philosophy around child care. It is seen as an integral part of the work of the Society and without child care there would be more barriers to participation.

We feel that if child care is to be regarded as more than babysitting, then the care we offer must go beyond supervision and child protection. We are responsible for providing a safe, healthy environment that will stimulate the children's awareness of life around them. We must help the children to develop a sense of fair play and to consider the rights of others while enjoying friendships with children and adults alike. It is important that each day the children be involved in free play where the child can receive undivided attention one on one and in play with other children where the children learn to share and socialize. Play is the vehicle through which most of our knowledge is acquired during the preschool years. Since the children will be spending a lot of their waking time in childcare, we will try our best to make childcare as much like home as possible.

One of the greatest barriers facing involvement in the community was child care. Many women who otherwise would be very active found it impossible because family responsibilities took precedence. Knowing this, child care was provided from the beginning. This solved many problems and created many problems at the same time. In the beginning there was nothing for the children, toys and games were expensive and hard to get. The child care room was staffed with volunteers some of whom were not interested in stimulating the children. Most were not qualified child care workers. There were language barriers because of

the diversity of the people. It was a long search to find a child care worker who would relate to the issues facing this community, who could deal with poverty and language barriers, deal effectively with parents with low self-esteem and help children who never had any previous experience with group play interact.

One such worker was Karen Cook:

I have been working with the children in our community for about three years now. It is true that children are children everywhere but due to the low income needs area that I usually choose to work in, our kids are special. While the moms are involved in these programs the children are involved in various activities in child care. When I first started to work for CANDORA, there were about six children coming on a drop-in basis to child care. There was a small selection of toys and a table and chairs. By Christmas break, we had about 30 children. CANDORA was growing and with it the number of children. During this time the Settlement Language program was put in place. This program offers a settlement course for immigrant people. It teaches the bare essentials of living in Canada, such as grocery shopping, mailing a letter, as well as basic English. After this course the participants are ready for English as a Second Language. The children of these participants come to CANDORA child care. Most have no English, have just been uprooted from their own countries and are very frightened. Our philosophy is based on mutual respect. We have programs designed to help children feel comfortable and happy. A lot of our focus is on feelings and feeling free to express those feelings. With the second language children this is a particular challenge. I have learned that language is not the most important thing when dealing with children. Actions do speak louder than words and this learning can be passed on to all the children in child care. For instance for a child who is upset that it is not his turn to paint, and handles this by throwing things around, nine times out of ten a hug will do the trick. The different types of children that come through CANDORA would be far too great to mention. Most are from single parent families. Many have witnessed or experienced family violence. I have seen lots with discipline problems in my three years. Some have physical disabilities. I have since left this position, but I can't resist going back to childcare at least once a week to collect some of those all important hugs.

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Community Advocacy

CANDORA... is unique in every way. We come together like one big happy family, people from all walks of life with a variety of skills and talents to share.

One of the ways our project reaches out is through our community advocacy project. It can be extremely difficult for people to get involved. First they have to build a sense of trust with you. Then you must stress confidentiality, assuring them that what they say will not be taken any further. They need the support to overcome the obstacles they face in their personal lives. We make contact with the Board of Health, Win House (a shelter for women who are experiencing domestic violence) and set up visits where we can discuss the programs CANDORA offers and encourage people to attend. The whole idea is to bring people out of isolation and to get back to being involved with the community.

Through this type of support, we find that people gain the strength and courage to build up their own network of support. They gain for themselves positive relationships bringing happiness to themselves as well as others. This may be the first step to rebuilding their lives. Being responsive and available at all times is key to helping people learn more about themselves and their community. CANDORA is not designed to judge, assess or lecture, we were created to share, express, exchange and respect all our members.

In my life CANDORA allowed me to build many lasting friendships and has always been there for me. It has also given me the personal commitment to speak when I find injustice in my life or my community. It is for me rewarding and challenging to witness on a daily basis people adjusting, making choices and learning to control their circumstances. I am grateful to be a part of such a wonderful experience as CANDORA...

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Money, Money, Money

"I have learned that every person "even the most unnoticed" has something to share with the group, something of value."

The first goal of CANDORA was to get money into the hands of the people who needed the money. A lot of people think that poor people are poor because they don't know how to manage their money. Poor people are poor because they don't have enough money. Some of the people in CANDORA are paid. It is not a lot of money, and usually it is a small amount that does not reduce the amount of benefits that people would receive from social assistance. Everyone who participates in the Advocacy Project and the Employment Preparation Project is paid. Money is paid because that is one way to value people's input. People who spend their time in other jobs are paid. These are jobs and people work hard at them. The time that people put into the project is valuable. It lets people stay in the job because they are not so worried about needing to earn money elsewhere. People live in poverty and need money. It is hard to concentrate on other things when you are always worried about money. Many participants said they started because of the money, but they stay for other reasons.

"I've learned a lot of new things and I feel the group helped when I felt stressed and were always confidential."

There are also paid staff that coordinate the programs and deal with funding. A lot of staff time of the CANDORA Society goes into the meeting of government requirements for the program. The requirements of accountability and evaluation can be challenging when two groups are looking at the results from a different perspective. It can be difficult to measure "success" when you are working at changing attitudes and self esteem, and a government funder is looking at how many people found jobs. Any group that is dependent on government funding will find that a great deal of time is spent in maintaining the funding.



The CANDORA Society is challenged to find ways to build the income base for their community in other ways. Anne Boyenga Nikolai, a coordinator at Candora, shares her hopes for the long term.

...to be able to look at some community economic development that would honour the skills that they have rather than have people working in the competitive workforce, because it's not working. There's too much catch up that has to happen for a lot of women, so maybe we create something for them in this community through the Co-op that would honour the skills they have and allow them to at least supplement their income. Maybe this generation won't see themselves get totally off social allowance, but that doesn't matter, it's okay to be on that social allowance and they're modelling some good stuff for kids. Maybe the next generation won't feel so imprisoned by a system that they can't get away from it.

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Loretta is one long time community member who has seen a change in her life. She was a part of the Abbottsfield Women's Project and joined CANDORA in 1992. In an interview with Bev Sochatsky Downing, Loretta speaks of her involvement with CANDORA.

I came — well Yvonne and everyone kept bugging me to come. It wasn't viable earlier because of stuff happening in my life, and from a monetary point of view it didn't make sense — the money I would make here would get taken back by the government because I was getting money from my daughter — she was living with us then.

Last fall it became possible for me to come — I can't work now — because of my health — and I wanted to do something — I got kind of bored just sitting around the house — so I came over and I put in an application to work as a community advocate. ...we were having one of our regular Tuesday meetings here at CANDORA. CANDORA needed someone to go to a meeting to talk about the Supports for Independence Program. So I went to that meeting and that was the beginning of my involvement with the committees and the work that I am doing.

I am on the SFI (Supports for Independence, the Alberta social allowance program) client advisory committee working with the Edmonton Social Planning Council. I am on the committee for the revision of the Other Welfare Manual. I go to fifty million meetings.

I faxed Mike Cardinal (Minister of Family and Social Services) an invitation to come and meet with CANDORA — we would have a question and answer period.

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Participatory Education

The CANDORA Society operates with some basic assumptions of participatory education. This kind of educational approach works from the belief that the experts are those people who live the issues and the learning needs to be based on that lived reality. Another starting point is the belief that everyone teaches and everyone learns. The individual is honoured for their knowledge and experience. The group works together to find solutions to community problems. To avoid the tendency to blame individuals, we analyze the causes and effects of being poor in a poor neighbourhood. People are capable. Each person is responsible for their own learning.

“We consistently began our educational sessions by asking the questions “What brings meaning to your life? Why are you here?” Most meetings are started with a check-in. This is simply a way to let each person say how they are, what is happening in their lives. Often it is the check-in that determines what will happen in the meeting. Part of the educational approach is daring to deal with people as they are, with their problems and their hopes. The best education is education that relates to our reality.

The housekeeping list sets the other part of the agenda. Here are some examples of what’s happening in the community where CANDORA is situated.

Housekeeping March 9, 1993

- 1) St. Sophia Community Meeting
- 2) Edmonton Housing
- 3) Food Security Meeting
- 4) Hostesses
- 5) Glengarry Family and Social Services
- 6) Native Awareness, Rundle School

Approaching the Job Site

- questions to ask
- Job Interview
- questions to ask
- how to answer questions

Housekeeping

- craft and bake sale
- Landlord & Tenant Issues
- Food Security Forum
- Candora's 5th Birthday
- phones
- collective kitchen
- pick time to work,
everyone to bake one item

Cecile—aprons

Darlene—crocheted cushion tops

Native crafts

The group may use discussions, lectures from outside resource people, or role playing to look at issues in their lives. They may meet with officials from social services to discuss their needs, or take a course in first aid. Perhaps they are meeting to make plans for the shopping for the collective kitchen. Several may be at a table doing beadwork or a new crochet stitch. One former worker in the community has said that "When their hands are busy, their tongues will loosen."



Does the seemingly chaotic approach at Candora make a difference in people's lives? Anne Boeyenga Nikolai gives some of her reflections.

"So somebody can make a quilt and they couldn't before. Well of course it helps. It's all part of a bigger whole, where we feel more like we live together in a community where we need to support each other, and to me that's just really wonderful. It's not changing political powers, but I think that having political people come out to CANDORA and saying that it's important that you vote, that people slowly start to feel a sense of "yeah—if I vote I can really make a difference. If I speak up it will make a difference." The uniqueness of CANDORA is that you always find out that collectively you are much stronger than you are individually. If CANDORA decides to support somebody or a cause, you know you can speak as a group and you are much stronger.

Often the group is asked to make presentations at conferences, or with the media. One participant says of her participation at a conference, "We talked about the things that we have earned the right to talk about."

The CANDORA women have used a variety of popular theatre techniques to convey their message to other groups and to articulate their own problems and solutions. Some examples are found on the following page.

SKIT 1

- children in school
- sleeping in school
- looking out of window, lonely
- no concentration, no energy
- angry frustrated
- fighting
- depressed, moody
- impolite, aggressive
- steal from stores, other lunches
- keep to selves, poor grades
- resentful
- towards parents, kids who have more

Second scene:

- teacher at the front
 - kids being disruptive
 - taking something from someone else's lunch
 - sent to principal's office
- "other kid's treat me different"

Teacher should know, trained to observe

refer to counsellor

child talking about problems

- don't have to talk
- body language, arms closed to protect oneself

brings lunch — no breakfast — eats 1/2 before school

eat other 1/2 at recess — nothing at lunch

Scott and Joey — wants Scott to share lunch

be able to ask if you're hungry

SKIT 2

Theme: elderly, how they get forgotten, put aside 65 disabled, ill
diabetes, not healthy
rooming house

Scene:

- old man, wheelchair
- phone
- waits for mail at screen door
- postman "Hi Charley, nothing today"

phones worker, told "cheque mailed, nothing to do until beginning of next month"

phones son, asks for food. Sorry dad, ...

Charlie no food

cat meowing

rolls to window pulls out Bible. He'll call....

Sometimes, as a result of appearing at conferences, the women of Candora become members of other community groups. Georgia Baius writes “Because I was part of the CANDORA group, I was asked to be a member of the Edmonton Food Policy Council. The Food Policy Council came about to find real solutions for people on low income, living below the poverty line, whether on welfare or working poor. We are working to find solutions—which may include transportation to mega stores and food buying clubs.”

This kind of participation is another part of the participatory education model: a time to act, a time to reflect. When people are taken seriously, when they are listened to and accepted, change can happen. It may be hard to measure, but it can be seen in how people feel about themselves and their community.

Now was the right time to get involved. I needed something to do rather than brood about myself. According to my doctor I shouldn't be able to do all the things that I am doing. I should be sitting in a corner twiddling my thumbs.”

Social analysis is another aspect of participatory education. People learn that they are not alone, that problems are not only personal, but systemic. Celia, with her experience from another country, offers her perspectives on social analysis. The process of change begins with the knowledge of what is happening. Celia looks at the reality of living in poverty.

We have to live every day of the week, every day of the month, every day of the year, trying to survive, trying to give our children the best we can without resources. We have to see, every day, in our children's faces, their hunger, their wish for many things that we cannot afford. We have to live every day watching our children full of depression and frustration from a young age. Most of the time we cannot afford to buy the clothes and shoes in the new fashions — things other kids have — because we don't have the money for that. We think with anguish. What kinds of adults will our children become? Adult people without childhood? Adults that never knew, that never had the smallest happiness that make all children smile, that can enjoy everything. Adults who wish to forget their teens, because at this age everything was worse than always. Adults that when they were children were always sick, because poverty and illness always are together, they are like a marriage, one does not live without the other.

Can we be surprised? We know children need good and nutritious food. How could our children be healthy if we feed them as we can, not as they need? Who can expect them to do well in school when they are hungry? When they are

always dreaming or wishing to have something they will never have!! We all should remember how it is to be a child and wish for something.

The process of participatory education builds community. It is within that community that people find the courage to ask the kind of questions that Celia asks, and where people often find the courage to act. Ann Boeyenga Nikolai:

I think everybody comes to the community in a different way. To me, building community just means bringing women out of isolation and giving the possibility for women to come together. If coming together for one woman means she feels more comfortable coming to a knitting class on Thursday afternoon and she doesn't feel comfortable to come to an education session, that's fine. We all come to understand in different ways, and community means that if just a couple of people feel some strength from each other by spending some time together and that eventually that might then mushroom into something bigger. But to me it's not a specific program that builds community, it's again a place to be, it's having a community centre, it's having free child care and it's honouring above all the person that comes in—just where they are at and not saying "I have an expectation that in 3 months from now you are going to be at a certain point," saying, "I'm really glad that you felt comfortable enough to come and join us, because of coming back into the community and we do it in different ways.

Ongoing evaluation is also part of the learning process. In response to the statement "What we have learned," the group generates the following:

- takes a lot of patience
- be flexible
- learning from others
- not imposing values on others
- honouring other's and ours lifestyles
- evaluating generating numbers to support financing
- challenging or looking critically at mainstream culture
- knowing our boundaries home phone #
- together we can change anything
- can't be everything to everyone
- important to reflect on where we've been to see the difference
- stronger
- we are who we are regardless of who we work with
- don't try to speak their language, tell our truths

- people speaking for themselves as opposed to someone speaking for us
- experts are the people who live the issues
- encouragement/support
- trust
- teachable moment
- holding people as capable
- don't give up, try, try
- honouring people's choices

Struggles

The CANDORA Society had help from people who were willing to be facilitators and advisors. Bev and Cathy helped them to find money from different organizations, and worked with the group in the early stages to start planning and help learn more skills. In community development, there is a need to recognize the skills of all the people involved and be prepared to take the time to share those skills. A major philosophy of CANDORA is to work with people where they are, without outside agendas. This kind of ownership of the process, means that the community will develop on its own. People come in and out of CANDORA all the time. It is not a group that stays the same year after year. As needs are met, people move on. As lives change and circumstances permit, people move on. This means that there needs to be a long term commitment from some agency or person who will remain in the community and support the work over a long time. In a transient community, organization is not a short term activity.

Cathy Vereyken:

If we go into the community of Abbottsfield we can either go in as social workers helping these poor people or we can go into this community to find people who are leaders. I remember Carmen and Gloria were two prime examples of that and later Yvonne. I remember going around the table at our meetings here and asking "Who brought you here?" "Carmen, Gloria, and later, Yvonne" They were the leaders in the community.

Some people believe that changes can come to a community very quickly. The people who are part of the CANDORA Project know that it can take a long time for people to begin to work together and make changes. Carmen Huezo is a teacher from El Salvador and an elder in her community. She has been involved with CANDORA from the beginning. The Hispanic Women's Group was formed as a response to the needs of immigrant women to meet others and find out about resources in the community. She describes some of the barriers to getting one program going:

The Hispanic Group is maturing. For more than two years I have invited Hispanic women to join us in CANDORA. At first the response was so small. Reason? The Hispanic Community doesn't trust easily, because they have a long road behind them: political struggles, economic problems, fear, violence, no human rights, exploitation, injustice in their own land. In Latin America, the strong sense of family permits people to form communities, to do something like building houses for low income residents, or to fight against injustice, or open a new school together. People work shoulder to shoulder (side by side) for the welfare of the community. When we come to Canada everybody perceives the social reality in a new environment that we identify day by day: cultural differences, new language, new skills to develop, too many restrictions, lack of "Canadian work experience." These are some of the obstacles to getting a job.

The high number of unemployed immigrants will result in serious problems in their homes. When they are unable to act, inability to work causes anguish and the emotional and psychological health deteriorates, as do the family and religious values. Understanding between children, parents and relatives suffer drastic changes and leads to family violence. Unemployment drives their own insecurities against the rest of the family members. Professional immigrants are unable to work in their own professions in Canada. They are underemployed and are not as productive as they could be here, and they feel down. In fact the professional associations are closed to foreign professionals.

In our own country, people don't depend on government services. We do for ourselves and one for one another. But here we act different. Like social beings we accept our new life looking for the best, trying to keep the cultural values that we inherited.

CANDORA designed, together with Spanish speaking women, some programs that are running successfully. Twice a week 10 - 20 women gather to sew clothes for ourselves, to do beautiful crafts, crocheting, knitting and quilting, etc. One morning we meet to learn and teach Central and Latin American, Ukrainian and Canadian cooking.

Cake decoration, pickling and canning are other activities. For Christmas we baked gingerbread men and Christmas cookies. We have bake and craft sales in the Abbottsfield Mall. The instructors and the students are doing a wonderful job. Some Hispanic women are in the Employment Preparation Program. Others are in school. Everybody is going to do the best. The high demand of new Hispanic immigrants led us in 1990 to obtain assistance to initiate a Settlement Language Program.

Celia asks some hard questions about social assistance, and its effect on people. Even with changes to the program, the issues remain the same. Part of the struggle that poor people have is that the programs are not designed by them.

When the program Supports for Independence was born, we thought it would be good for us. It could be positive to have support to go back to school, for training for a new job, to be in the job market again. But we have had more than a year with the new program and everything is the same. Nothing is changing. We have the same problems as before: we can never reach our social worker, not by phone, not for an interview. And when after 3 or 4 weeks we can finally talk with them they always talk at us. They don't take the time to think about what we are talking about. We don't have any chance to have a break. Some of the social workers are making our life miserable only because we found a job at CANDORA working 5 hours a week making \$5.00 an hour. ...We want it (SFI) to work for us and for our future. We will ask for the opportunity to go back to school, to go back to work, to have better training for a better job. We have decided to change our situation, to change our story and make this Supports for Independence Program an advantage for us. Anyway that was the reason to create it. These were the goals of the government when the program was implemented. Or are we wrong? Didn't we understand well? We don't want more money for social assistance. We want work. We want fair wages. We want to go to work the same hours that our children are at school.

Almost all of us have small children. We need affordable child care. We want to work and forget social assistance, social workers, and the anguish of trying to talk to them.

Our economy is in very bad shape. Thousands of Canadians are losing their jobs. Thousands of people are looking for work. There is no new economic investment in the country or in the province. Nobody is creating new jobs. We are paying new taxes. Everything is going up. Our benefits are static. We don't have any access to know what kind of training is available to us. We don't know if we could be training for something that the country needs, like workers with a lot of new skills to compete in the international economy. We know we don't have access to this type of training.

The women who are part of CANDORA continue to become involved in other community activities and local issues. Some have mobilized around cut backs, or housing, or hot lunches for children. They have named the problems, as we can see from Celia's writing, and move on to make solutions for themselves.

Anne Boyenga Nikolai:

I don't think that it means that we are going to change the political structures in a really big way. We are not going to have changes to social allowance rights but, women here have challenged that. ... I think it's a sign that some social change is happening.

Conclusion

The CANDORA Society. It works because the people involved want it to work. There are people in the community who want to make changes. There are people who are willing to help find money and resources to help them.

"I come here, I have no family here.. this is my place — the weekend is long for me."

Each one learns from the other. Each one brings something special to the project. Each one wants to make life better for the people in the community. They work together. They laugh together. They cry together. That is community development.

CANDORA is the answer, is the right place to go. We need to be for each other, in CANDORA we have a sense of belonging."

Afterword

Celia Flores, March 1994

So many things have happened since we started the CANDORA Story. We have survived as a group so many changes in social policies. We have almost become experts in the Supports for Independence policies. We also participated in the production of a new book about welfare and social services. These two projects are now obsolete. We are now dealing with the most discriminatory of all government policies created by the Conservative leadership. We want to call to the attention of all of our readers and all the public opinion about these new policies of the Provincial Government. The cuts to the Social Services budget is putting the weight of the care for the elderly and the children on the shoulders of women. Mr. Klein said we have to learn how to take care of our seniors and children because the government won't do it anymore. But who are we? Who is it that has to take care of our children? and who has to work? And guess who will take care of the elderly in our families? The women, the mothers, the wives, the daughters. We want to call everyone's attention to the issues of Social Services, fighting for Social Services means fighting for the rights of women.

Where will be the needs of the woman for work; how will she be able to take care of the needs of her family? How will she have the money she needs?

Mr. Klein's policies want to ensure that women sink into deep poverty and misery, it's another way of saying that women in this society are not worth anything.

When I came to CANDORA for the first time, I couldn't speak one word of English. I thought that I did not have any future here, for my children everything was all right, but for me to take care of them and wait to die was my fate. But, step by step, I was finding in our group the strength and confidence I needed. Now I am a college student. I am doing very well in school. I enjoy learning and I think about my future. Now I will have a future.

We don't have the instruments we need to evaluate the positive changes that women in CANDORA have made through the years. But we observe those

changes and it makes all of us happy to watch the movement and the change. We have grown as an institution serving Rundle and Abbottsfield communities,

We have grown and been enriched by our experiences and sought answers to our day to day problems. We have also grown as individuals, learning from each other through dialogue and discussion. We have learned to identify the causes of our problems and struggled to find solutions, not only to have a positive impact in our lives, but in the community in general.

Appendix

The CANDORA Society is a non-profit society that is run by a volunteer board of directors. It has charitable status with Revenue Canada.

The objectives of the organization were amended at a meeting on July 27, 1989. The new objectives, which follow were passed unanimously by the members present.

The objectives of the organization are the following:

1. To strive to make the community a better place to live.
2. To undertake the social, cultural, recreational, or educational activities as would enhance the personal growth and development of its members;
3. To engage in, and promote such activities as would enhance the economic development of the community;
4. To promote and provide opportunities for its members to engage in activities which will enhance their abilities to be gainfully employed;
5. To reach out to residents of the community, especially those who are isolated, low-income families or individuals;
6. To act as advocates on behalf of the residents of the community regarding issues brought to the attention of the society;
7. To create employment opportunities for the low income residents of the community;
8. To support and work together with community agencies, organizations and any charitable or public institutions, societies or clubs or other undertakings for the furtherance of the objects of the society.

The proposed objects of the Society are:

- I. To promote the social welfare of the family by preventing and alleviating distress.
- II. To promote the welfare of children, by providing programs that foster the optimum development of the physical, emotional, and social nature of the child.
- III. To provide services that benefit the community as a whole by protecting the lives and property of the members of the community.
- IV. To provide healthy recreation for the children and adults in the community.

Community Action

In addition to the efforts of individual and small groups of women, the Society also attempts to act in a broader community context. What follows is a copy of the brief that was presented to support a community centre in the Abbottsfield and Rundle area. It is one example of a community action.

In this community there must be a support system where people come together, or they tend to be isolated, this support system breaks the cycle of poverty.

The CANDORA group is such a support system, that benefits the whole community. However since the CANDORA group uses the Abbottsfield Community Centre, at the mall, for its activities, growth is limited. Space available is limited, the mall's limited hours of operation adds more limits and curbs.

A community centre building is required for expansion and growth, as maximum potential is stifled without one in Abbottsfield area. This should be a community centre that is owned and operated by the City of Edmonton, giving more stability in this transient location. There seems to be a discrimination directed at people living in this community. A community centre of our own can help to change this attitude.

A good community centre is wheel chair accessible, and is also within walking distance, as most low income people do not have bus fare or transportation. The community centre would consist of:

- 1) A place to meet, rooms that are multifunctional, that can be divided for various uses as needed, deriving maximum use. For example; one room can be converted into a theatre, for acting out life situations, showing why the negative way will not work, and teaching positive life skills through theatre.
- 2) Walk in program for teens.
- 3) Structured groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous.
- 4) Dance classes, martial arts classes.
- 5) An area for crafts and creativity.
- 6) Community dances and get togethers.
- 7) A drop-in program for seniors.
- 8) Baby sitting and after school care.
- 9) Personal growth, self esteem, goal setting, positive thinking, and action, self-help, etc.
- 10) A community store on site selling recycled goods, an ideal place to gather and meet.

For example, a quilt made of recycled textiles, other examples might be earrings and brooches made of puzzles that are recycled into jewellery that is fashionable. Creative uses of recycled materials is our mission. Other examples might be recycled inner tubes from cars and trucks, as exercise elastic, as a rebounder, using recycled materials benefits the whole community.

- 11) A playground and a skating rink is needed, as a healthy outlet, it must be created to allow negative energy to be transmuted into healthy, creative, constructive ways instead of rebellion and vandalism.
- 12) A speakers corner inviting speakers and or politicians to come and give their point of view. Resulting in more interaction and participation. An information corner, providing information on housing, of all available programs and agencies in the area.

Benefits:

An opportunity for positive growth and change, as our children will experience this positive change, and reflect this in their behaviour. Development of talents and abilities lead to better perceptions of ourselves, allowing change to take place, and that change gives us hope.

A good community centre encourages community involvement, positive interaction creating higher and higher levels of self-esteem and independence. A community centre is important because it does have an effect as to how good we feel about ourselves. How we interact and motivate others, creating value in the individual. Focusing on the positive qualities and strengths brings back our pride and shows us what we can do.

"Teach a person how to fish and you feed them for a lifetime." This leads to lower costs, productiveness and awareness as well as a rise in consciousness of the people living here. The end result is open and honest communication between the city and the community, doing things together in a mutually rewarding nurturing environment.

In the long run a community centre in Abbottsfield and Rundle saves money as there is less delinquency, less violence and crime. This creates a healthier, happier community, which will attract the taxpayers, and the business to sustain the positive momentum. Total cost is very low compared to the improved quality of life. It will be win, win for everyone. Everyone wins; the individual, the family, and the community.

As CANDORA is sincerely committed to excellence, success is assured.

Notes about the Employment Preparation Program

The Employment Preparation Program came out of one of the needs in the communities. The composition of the communities is primarily women and their children.. Many of the women have been at home for a long period of time and find it difficult to make the transition for paid employment. The Employment Preparation Program provides the participants with the opportunity to work and learn marketable working skills. It is important to begin on a part-time basis to allow time to gain confidence, learn new skills, meet new people and learn about potential interests and talents while our families are growing up. If the obstacles can be dealt with gradually, success will be more likely.

Objective:

The objective of the program is to provide employment experience with on-going support for the community residents who require experience before re-entering the labour market. The participants are employed for one year with gradually increasing hours of employment.

The program has four phases, each lasting thirteen weeks.

Phase 1

time 5 hours/week

This phase emphasizes living skills, personal growth and community awareness.

Phase 2

time 10 hours/week

This phase continues with the personal growth issues as well as an additional employment education component. Five hours a week is spent at a job placement to incorporate the learnings from the educational sessions.

Phase 3

time 15 hours/week

At this stage, the participants are exposed to a variety of job settings that are conducive to providing a positive work experience. In return, the employers benefit from their contribution.

Phase 4

time 20 hours/week

A job placement is found based on the person's aptitude, skills and interest.

Job placements should potentially include:

- Willingness on the part of the employer to provide on-the-job learning in a supportive atmosphere.
- The possibility for on-going employment upon completion of the program.
- Minimum of travel distance.
- Hours of work that support a healthy family life.

The program participants were paid at the rate of \$5.00 per hour. Each phase lasted 3 months. The program was paid for through Alberta Career Development and Employment. The program continues in a revised form.